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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the causes of job burnout, a condition which has been linked with high personnel turnover, friction with co-workers and supervisors, increased dissatisfaction with both the job and the organization, job withdrawal, decreased productivity and absenteeism. The paper discusses the communication skills necessary to prevent or reduce burnout from individual and organizational perspectives. The paper places primary emphasis on coping techniques in the following areas: developing interpersonal communication skills, realigning perceptions, empathic listening, distinguishing fact from inference, confronting burnout openly, developing appropriate training programs, and increasing constructive feedback. Attached are 42 references. (Author/KEH)

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Communication Techniques for Individual and Organizational Coping with Job Burnout

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Communication Techniques For Individual and Organizational Coping with Job Burnout

Abstract

Burnout causes major problems for both individuals and organizations. Job burnout has been linked with high personnel turnover, friction with both co-workers and supervisors, increased dissatisfaction with both the job and the organization, job withdrawal, decreased productivity, and absenteeism. The author advocates approaching the prevention and treatment of burnout from a combination of individual, group[1], and organizational perspectives. In each area, the communication skills necessary to prevent or reduce burnout are presented. Primary emphasis is placed on techniques for: developing interpersonal communication skills, realigning perceptions, empathic listening, distinguishing fact from inference, confronting burnout openly, developing appropriate training programs, and increasing constructive feedback.

In ancient China the symbol for stress included two written characters--one for danger and one for opportunity. Stress can be helpful or harmful depending upon its intensity, frequency, and upon how it is mediated. Unmediated stress is "the number one health problem in the U.S. today" (Cedoline, 1982, p. 4).

Burnout is one of the problems resulting from unmediated stress. A previously committed individual experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion centered around the workplace that is brought on by unrelieved demands (internal or external; positive or negative) is burning out. Burnout is a loss of will, motivation, idealism, moral purpose, or commitment at work. You can't burn out if you have never been on fire. Overcommitted individuals are most likely to experience the gradual process of detachment or disengagement from work brought on by an imbalance between resources and demands. The greater the consequences of failure to meet demands, the greater the distress. Dr. Edward Stambaugh estimates that as many as 10 percent of

Americans succumb to the effects of burnout every year (Cedoline, 1982). A recent survey of 9,000 workers from 21 organizations reports that fifteen percent of the workers felt moderately burned out and that forty-five percent felt high levels of emotional exhaustion (Golembiewski, Munzenrider & Stevenson, 1986).

Burnout is exceptionally debilitating to both the individual and the organization. It has been linked with high personnel turnover, friction with both co-workers and supervisors, increased dissatisfaction with both the job and the unit, job withdrawal, decreases in productivity, and absenteeism (Jackson & Schuler, 1983).

The prevention and treatment of burnout assume increasing importance as awareness grows regarding its debilitating consequences for both individuals and organizations. Clearly, prevention is better and cheaper than treatment. The prevention and treatment of burnout often require a combination of individual, group, and organizational approaches.

Many authorities assert that developing effective communication skills constitutes one of the most promising approaches to combatting job burnout (Cherniss, 1980b; Farber, 1983; Maslach, 1976; Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981; Ray, 1983; Ray, 1987). However, these authorities provide no detailed analysis of how to develop the recommended communication skills. Furthermore, they provide no detailed analysis of applications of communication training to ameliorate the relatively unique communication problems of job burnouts. Recently, communication scholars have reported on the relationship of supportive communication to job burnout (see Miller, Ellis, Zook & Lyles, 1990; Miller, Zook & Ellis, 1989; Ray, 1991; Starnaman & Miller, 1990). "These studies have added pieces to the communication-job stress-burnout puzzle but its complexity has still not been fully explicated" (Ray, 1991, p. 92). This paper will examine a variety of individual and organizational communication skills for dealing with job burnout.

Individual Coping Methods

Develop Interpersonal Communication Skills

Poor interpersonal skills are the major cause of problems on the job (Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim & Sleight, 1988) and are major contributors to job burnout (Cherniss, 1980a; Miller, Stiff & Ellis, 1988; Ray, 1987; Ray & Miller, 1990). Learning to be assertive, coping with envy and jealousy, developing self-esteem, and improving skills in conflict resolution are some of the requisite interpersonal skills for coping with burnout. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each of these areas. However, because it is mandatory in dealing with burnout to develop skills for resolving interpersonal and organizational conflict, this area will be used to illustrate applications of interpersonal communication skills in coping with job burnout.

There are two primary types of conflict. Substantive conflict is rooted primarily in objective differences. Affective conflict arises from subjective differences. Substantive conflict can be dealt with

by: realizing that some conflict is natural and desirable; emphasizing facts during disagreements; keeping the discussion organized; understanding what is being said; doing more objective questioning; providing tentative solutions; analyzing the quality of evidence and reasoning utilized by the conflicting parties; securing agreement on tasks and goals; and increasing affection among the participants.

Affective conflict can be dealt with by: avoiding self-oriented behavior; postponing or avoiding certain issues; increasing empathy and listening; accepting individual differences; understanding the factors affecting perception; team building and strengthening feelings of security; and recognizing hidden agendas.

It is essential in either type of conflict to seek solutions that will satisfy conflicting parties when possible; too often conflicts are cast in win-lose terms. An individual experiencing burnout may find it difficult to apply effective conflict resolution techniques even if knowledgeable of them. Training

programs may facilitate the utilization of more effective interpersonal skills in conflict resolution.

Realign Perceptions

One's perceptions of self, co-workers, clients, and the job are major factors in causing or combatting burnout. Perceptions of self often affect distress. Burnout victims often accentuate the negative about themselves and eliminate the positive. The typical burnout was a successful, motivated, committed, valued, and idealistic worker. These positive qualities are often devalued or ignored by the burnout. Feelings such as anger, helplessness, hopelessness, frustration, cynicism, apathy, and worthlessness may cause burnouts to perceive the world through distress-colored glasses.

Every case of burnout involves dispositional and situational perspectives (Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981). "When addressing the ecological sources of stress and frustration - the root cause of burnout - it is most important to consider the individual's perceptions and interpretations of their meaning and significance" (Carroll & White, 1982, p. 49). The

literature on burnout is replete with studies and expert opinion supporting the interaction between faulty perceptions and burnout (see, for example: Farber, 1983; Freudenberger, 1980; Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981; Veninga & Spradley, 1981). However, that same literature provides no detailed analysis of the nature of perception and its role in intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. An understanding of the major factors affecting perception is central to reducing perceptual dysfunctions associated with job burnout.

Our background, self-esteem, expectations about a situation, likes and dislikes, objectives, and conceptions about others' expectations all filter our perceptions. Because such filters render our perceptions personal and projective and because individual perception plays a large role in controlling burnout, it is often more appropriate to use a mirror instead of a telescope in analyzing this type of distress. "We cannot expect others to make things better for us, but we can make them better for

ourselves" (Maurice, 1983, p. 36). Changing appraisals or reinterpreting the data can prevent or reduce the powerless thinking that inflames burnout. Eliminate deadwood demands, develop realistic expectations, and set realistic goals (Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981). Develop a realistic personal definition of success and failure and avoid social comparison (Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981). Take a more detached view of the job; step back and mentally observe job performance (Veninga & Spradley, 1981). Analyze both the job and realistic alternatives; perhaps the present job has significant unappreciated positive aspects (Nelson, 1980). On the other hand, do not be afraid to change jobs or locations. Put distance between job success and maintenance of self-concept lest any job-related criticism "becomes a rejection of who you are rather than what you have done" (Freudenberger, 1980, p. 176). Take primary responsibility for job-related problems and get out of the habit of blaming others for these problems. Predicate behavior on personal choices, when possible, rather than responding to what "ought to be

done." Using language such as "I choose" and "I won't" instead of "I ought to" or "I can't" places primary responsibility for behavior on the individual.

D. H. Lawrence described the perceptual practices of one of his characters: "Poor Richard Lovatt worried himself to death; struggling with the problem of himself and calling it Australia" (1953, pp. 129-130). Many a burnout has struggled with personal problems and blamed them on the job, the boss, the client, or the co-worker. To paraphrase Thoreau, as long as burnouts mismanage their perceptions, they are apt to mismanage everything else.

> We do not believe that people can take complete control of their perceptions of stress and thereby render every form of work stress powerless. For millions of people, the best, perhaps the only option, is to change the stress itself. However, we believe that most people can make significant changes in their perceptual practices. We can consider other possible definitions of the situation. And, if successful, it can give us

dramatic and lasting relief from work stress. (Veninga & Spradley, 1981, p. 91)

Burnouts must learn that the personal and projective nature of their perceptions determine their definitions of reality. "A definition is inevitably an abstraction, a leaving out of details" (Haney, 1967, p. 473). If burnouts are unaware that they are leaving out details in defining a problem (especially if they are important or vital details), they are in danger of unconsciously permitting this narrowed perception to restrict their problem-solving ability. Such narrowed perception can be illustrated by the negative self-fulfilling prophecies that are often responsible for burnouts' perceived lack of control, helplessness, hopelessness, etc., in the work place. One effective method of helping individuals realize their role in problem creation is darkroom therapy (Veninga & Spradley, 1981). In a quiet, relaxed atmosphere, individuals picture their problem. They are taught to enlarge or reduce this problem mentally. This technique demonstrates that the magnitude of any

problem is partly a function of our perceptual processes. "We are what we see. We see what we choose. Perceptions are a hypothesis" (Robbins, 1976, p. 320).

The view of perceptions as hypothetical (and often unreliable) can be disturbing.

> To those who crave a certain, definite, and dependable world (and that includes all of us in varying degrees) the admission that we respond only to what it appears to be rather than what it is necessarily lessens our predictability about the "real world." Even those who intellectually accept the perception model and the roles that stimuli, set, learning, and so on, play in determining responses may have difficulty converting the concept into performance. (Haney, 1967, p. 60)

The usefulness of interpretations depends upon one's awareness of personal involvement in the perception process. A deeper understanding of perception coupled with a willingness to open oneself

to expanded awareness fosters more effective methods of communication for dealing with job burnout.

Listen Empathically

Approximately forty percent of one's waking day is spent listening. Research supporting the importance of listening is rapidly expanding (Curtis, Winsor & Stephens, 1989; DiSalvo, 1980; Hunt & Cusella, 1983; Muchmore & Galvin, 1983). However, over "30 years of research clearly indicates that we listen at approximately 25 percent effectiveness and efficiency" (Steil, Barker & Watson, 1983, p. 38).

Effective listening is difficult for most people; it is much more difficult for an individual experiencing burnout. Professional problems, anxiety, and closed-mindedness have been identified as major factors inhibiting listening success (Steil, Barker & Watson, 1983; Wolvin & Coakley, 1985). Poor peer and group relationships, withdrawal from or irritability with co-workers, detachment from clients, diminished frustration tolerance, increasing rigidity, cynicism, apathy, emotional exhaustion, disorientation,

moodiness, and physical problems compound listening problems for burnout victims.

Distortion of reality is often associated with job burnout. Effective listening is essential to reduce distortion of reality. One approach to increasing listening effectiveness is the avoidance of bad listening habits. These habits to avoid, by now well established in the listening literature, include: Do not decide in advance that the subject is uninteresting. Do not criticize the communicator's manner of delivery; try to understand the message no matter how poorly it is presented. Listen for the main ideas of the message rather than concentrating on the facts only. Do not fake attention to the speaker or allow one's mind to wander during a discussion. Do not create distractions while listening or engage in premature evaluation; remember that evaluation will be more meaningful if it is withheld until comprehension is as complete as possible.

Training in such factors as facilitating empathic listening and avoiding bad listening habits has proven

successful. "In schools where listening is taught, listening comprehenion has as much as doubled in a few months" (Steil, Barker & Watson, 1983, p. 6). Empathic listening is the key to comprehension (see Bruneau, 1989 for a detailed analysis of empathic listening). Try to see an issue from one's co-workers' or superior's perspective. Failure to consider a situation from others' perspectives creates a we-they orientation (this perspective is beautifully described by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "We and They").

This we-they orientation is exacerbated by insensitivity to nonverbal factors. As much as sixty-five percent of the meaning in two-person communication is conveyed through nonverbal channels (Knapp, 1972). Thus, empathic listening requires careful attention to silences, sighs, down-cast eyes, vocal intensity, strained voice, rising pitch, facial expression, posture, drumming fingers, fidgeting, and the thousands of additional silent messages that may help listeners understand the words the speaker conveys (see Wolvin & Coakley, 1985, pp. 126-151 for an excellent discussion

of how to interpret nonverbal communication in an actual communication scenario).

Empathic listening is especially difficult for individuals experiencing burnout (Freudenberger, 1980). The factors inhibiting listening success described previously virtually ensure a myopic view of the world. Heightened tensions, the unwillingness to consider other viewpoints, and the unwillingness to risk seeing problems from someone else's perspective limit empathic listening (Rogers, 1983).

Because empathic listening is so difficult to accomplish, perception checking mechanisms must be employed to gauge success. The most obvious (but too often unused) method of perception checking is to ask questions of the speaker to assess the effectiveness of listening behavior. A second method to assess empathic listening is paraphrasing, repeating the sender's position in your own words and eliciting a response (Rogers, 1983). Care must be exercised in paraphrasing efforts. One may find it artifical and mechanical at first but as with any other new skill, proper practice

should improve paraphrasing ability. "Use discretion in determining when paraphrasing is not and when it is necessary to insure understanding" (Wolvin & Coakley, 1985, p. 238). If the sender's message is merely repeated, attempts at paraphrasing can be redundant and annoying. Perhaps the greatest barrier to more effective use of paraphrasing is the energy and effort it requires.

> For the listener to travel with the sender beneath the sender's surface feelings in order to uncover layer upon layer of hidden feelings as well as to identify the sender's thoughts--many of which are often disjointed and unclear--and then reflect understanding of the sender's feelings and thoughts for confirmation demand a great deal of listener time and effort. (Wolvin & Coakley, 1985, p. 238)

Empathic listening should be practiced by everyone (see Wolvin & Coakley, 1985, pp. 219-232 for an excellent discussion of enhancing empathy in

listening). Open communication coupled with empathic listening by all parties may reduce job burnout.

Distinguish Fact From Inference

"A brief written presentation that winnows fact from opinion is the basis for decision making around here" (Ed Harness, former chairman of Procter and Gamble, in Peters, 1982, p. 151).

Burnout victims are likely to have a distorted view of reality because they often act upon their inferences as if they were the facts of a situation. Assumptions about co-workers, the job, superiors' motives, reasons for people's behavior, etc., may be treated as fact. Inferences involve mental leaps from the known to the unknown; as such, they must be viewed as less certain than direct observations. Because burnouts often treat their inferences as facts, they create unwarranted distress by expending time and emotional energy worrying about negative assumptions and jumping to conclusions. This failure to distinguish fact from inference makes problems more emotionally threatening. Mark Twain illustrated this

problem with his tongue-in-check observation: "My life has been full of misfortunes, most of which never happened."

"It is likely that the most important part of our communication is the part we infer. And yet we do this through our screen of personal biases, our needs, and our affective states" (Weaver, 1972, p. 70). Be aware of assumptions and treat them as probabilities rather than certainties. In good science a "law" that fails to describe reality accurately is rejected. Apply the same standard to abstractions. Test abstractions inductively by developing abstractions from specific cases where possible and testing the validity of abstractions through direct observation of similar realities (see Condon, 1975, pp. 50-51 for a more detailed discussion of evaluating high-level abstractions). Abstractions (maps) may be treated as if they were the reality (territory). The map may not represent the territory adequately. Furthermore, distressed individuals may be unaware that they are responding to the map and not to the territory that the

map should describe. Remember Artemus Ward's observation: "It ain't the things we don't know that hurt us. It's the things we do know that ain't so."

Individual coping strategies, including those discussed above, can be effective in preventing or ameliorating job burnout. However, organizational coping strategies must support these individual efforts.

Organizational Coping Methods

Confront Burnout Openly

Too often management ignores signs of burnout or adopts a "shape up or ship out" attitude where tact and understanding are called for. Managers must seek to identify and define the individual and institutional causes of burnout. They should increase their awareness of job stressors and job enrichers. The first-line manager should meet with each subordinate every six months to assess sources of stress and satisfaction in the work place. The manager should utilize this information to initiate appropriate institutional changes (Cherniss, 1980b).

Enlightened managers, recognizing the individual and organizational costs of job burnout, can help prevent it through anticipatory socialization programs for new employees. Such programs present the realities of the job in an attempt to reduce gaps between job expectations and realities. They also provide constructive strategies for coping with distress caused by unrealized expectations (see Jackson & Schuler, 1983 for a detailed description of these programs).

Institute Training Programs

Organizations can confront and combat job burnout through training programs. Each organization should compare its specific needs with the range of training programs and professional consultants available. Occupational burnout has many causes and many symptoms (Farber, 1983). The most effective approach is to tailor burnout training to the primary needs of the specific organization. Some training programs present individual coping methods without addressing group and organizational factors. Some social scientists emphasize group methods (social support) without

adequate treatment of individual and organizational coping methods. Some training addresses only organizational coping and downplays, or omits, individual and group approaches. Some trainers approach burnout only from the narrow perspective of their professional specialty such as relaxation therapy, biofeedback, or management training. These narrow approaches generally have limited impact in reducing job burnout (Farber, 1983).

It is crucial to avoid a one-shot approach to training (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1982). Follow-up on results and institute additional training or refresher courses. Do not expect burnout to vanish following even a well-planned training program.

Larger organizations may find it desirable to develop their own training programs for occupational burnout (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1982, pp. 133-153 offer excellent training guidelines). Organizational training should be structured by intensive study to answer the question: What kind(s) of burnout intervention should be offered by what kind(s) of

individuals; aimed at what target(s); with what purpose(s); with what effects on the individual, work setting, and organization (Farber, 1983). These training programs should address communication coping strategies for the individual as well as addressing managerial communication techniques designed to prevent or ameliorate employee burnout.

Increase Constructive Feedback

Employees often complain that their supervisors are too negative or never tell them what they feel. Many supervisors avoid feedback to (and from) employees as much as possible. They proudly assert to employees: "If you don't hear anything, you must be doing okay." The National Park Service conducted an exhaustive service-wide employee survey in 1983. Two items from that survey assessed the frequency of actual and desired feedback.

> How frequently do you receive feedback from your supervisor that helps you improve your performance?

A) Very Often B) Often C) Sometimes D) Rarely

E) Never

How frequently would you like to receive feedback from your supervisor relative to your performance?

A) Very Often B) Often C) Sometimes D) Rarely

E) Never

Only twenty-four percent of respondents reported that they "often" or "very often" received helpful feedback from their supervisor, while thirty-nine percent reported that they "rarely" or "never" received such feedback. When asked how often they would like to receive feedback on performance from their supervisor, sixty-seven percent said "very often" or "often"; only four percent said "rarely" or "never." Clearly, these employees desired much more performance feedback than they were receiving.

An article in the Harvard Business Review presents a serious indictment of many organizational efforts to provide feedback on job performance.

> Many compensation and performance appraisal programs actually contribute to people's sense that their efforts will be unrecognized, no matter how well they do. Organizational structures and processes that inhibit timely attacks on problems and delay competitive actions actually produce much of the stress that people experience at work. If top executives fail to see that organizational factors can cause burnout, their lack of understanding may perpetuate the problem. (Levinson, 1981, p. 79)

Providing regular and sufficient constructive feedback on employee performance reduces the anomie, feelings of hopelessness, and lack of control that often cause job burnout. Several studies indicate that the amount of information regarding successes and performance level received by employees is "significantly and negatively correlated with burnout. . . . The more feedback received from supervisors and administrators, the less burnout" (Pines, 1982, p. 204).

Developing a systematic method within the organization to ensure that employees know that their contributions are appreciated may help reduce burnout. "People need information that supports their positive self-images, eases their concerns, and refuels them psychologically" (Levinson, 1981, p. 79).

Employees also expect supervisors to listen to their ideas and feelings. Managers should consider enhancing two-way communication through consultation and open-door policies. However, it is counter-productive to encourage more open communication if the manager does not use some of the constructive ideas of subordinates. One particularly promising application, although high-risk management, is structured evaluation of supervisors by subordinates. The SESS approach increases employee perception of control. If management utilizes the constructive evaluation to help analyze counseling and training needs for the supervisor, the SESS approach may increase employee influence over one of the most important causes of job burnout (Maslach, 1982).

Conclusion

Burnout is debilitating to individuals and organizations. Burnout victims can utilize effective communication to rise from their own ashes, like the legendary phoenix, and return to satisfying and productive careers given sufficient group and organizational support. Research efforts should be initiated to determine the efficiency of a variety of communication training programs in coping with job burnout on both individual and organizational levels.

Note

[1]Group communication techniques will be presented in a forthcoming article by the author on "The Nature and Development of Social Support Systems for Combatting Job Burnout" (in editorial review).

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